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Letter dated 23 January 1998 from the Permanent Representative of Turkey to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to transmit herewith a letter dated 22 January 1998 addressed to you by His Excellency Mr. Aytuğ Plümer, Representative of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (see annex).

I should be grateful if the text of the present letter and its annex could be circulated as a document of the General Assembly, under agenda item 61, and of the Security Council.

(Signed) Hüseyin E. ÇELEM
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

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ANNEX

Letter dated 22 January 1998 from Mr. Aytuğ Plümer addressed to the Secretary-General

Upon instructions from my Government, I have the honour to refer to the letter dated 30 December 1997 addressed to you by the Greek Cypriot representative at the United Nations, which contains outrageous charges regarding cultural property in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (A/52/756-S/1997/1020).

At the outset, I wish to remind the Greek Cypriot side that there is no "occupation" in Cyprus other than the 34-year-old occupation of the seat of government by the Greek Cypriot side and to stress that the reckless exploitation of the usurped title of "Government of Cyprus" as a weapon against the Turkish Cypriot side has been the main obstacle in the way of attaining a peaceful settlement in Cyprus.

Unfounded allegations on "systematic plundering" and "destruction" of cultural property in Northern Cyprus have been conclusively refuted not only by the Turkish Cypriot side, but also by independent sources, including a prominent United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) expert and the relevant committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

It should be recalled that, in a letter he wrote to The Times of London, the respected UNESCO expert, Mr. Jacques Dalibard, denied Greek Cypriot allegations of systematic and organized looting of the cultural heritage of Cyprus. On the other hand, Mr. Ymenus van der Werff, General Rapporteur of the Subcommittee on Culture and Education of the Council of Europe, who had come to the island with a delegation of experts to study the situation regarding cultural property in both parts of the island, reported the following on this subject in paragraph 5.3 of his report, which was published as a document of the Council of Europe under the symbol AS/CULT/AA (41) 1: "We saw no churches destroyed, though St. George in Limnia (in the North) was listed as such."

Contrary to what is claimed, it is the Greek Cypriot side that has always tried to eradicate all traces of Turkish-Muslim heritage of Cyprus, in particular during the years between 1963 and 1974, when they attempted to "cleanse" the island of its ethnic Turkish population through massacre, expulsion and various methods of violence and oppression. As pointed out in a previous communication addressed to you on the subject (A/52/366-S/1997/724 of 18 September 1997), during this tragic period, mosques, shrines and other places of Muslim worship in 103 villages across the island were destroyed. Today, the Greek Cypriot administration is still perpetuating a policy of religious intolerance and showing undisguised contempt towards the Islamic heritage in South Cyprus. The following quotation on this subject taken from the aforementioned Council of Europe report (para. 5.3) reveals the extent of the blatant acts of desecration and wilful destruction of Ottoman Turkish architecture in South Cyprus:

"We noted with regret the complete destruction of the main mosque in Paphos. The whole area has since been flattened to give way for a widened road junction and a car park. There is no memorial to the existence of the mosque. Below the road a Turkish bath complex remains hidden in rubble and vegetation awaiting restoration. The Turkish Cypriot cemetery by the nearby St. Sophia Mouttalas mosque is dilapidated."

A recent case in point of the utter disrespect shown by the Greek Cypriot administration for the Turkish-Muslim heritage of Cyprus is the condition of the historic Omeriye Mosque in South Cyprus, which, according to the Greek Cypriot weekly Selides of 16 January 1998, is in a state of total neglect, its premises covered with piles of litter and its historic marble columns damaged and displaced. It will be recalled that this mosque, located in the Greek Cypriot sector of Nicosia, was the target of an arson attack in recent years that damaged its historic structure. The magazine reports the following:

"As we enter the mosque premises, the piles of rubbish stand out, as a stark reminder of the total neglect and insensitivity towards cultural heritage. I am sitting in front of the mosque ... hoping to see even a signboard giving information about this religious monument, but to no avail."

Regarding the allegations of "desecration" made in the said letter of the Greek Cypriot representative over the conversion of a number of churches into mosques or museums, it should be emphasized that conservation of historic buildings through use is not only permissible but also recommended under relevant international instruments. For instance, the Amsterdam Declaration, which was issued by the Congress on European Architectural Heritage in October 1975, states the following:

"It has been shown that the historic buildings can be given new functions related to the needs of contemporary life." (p. 7, para. 3)

"Local authorities should afford functions to buildings which, whilst respecting their character, correspond to the needs of contemporary life and thus ensure their survival." (p. 9, paras. 4 and 5)

"A policy of conservation also means the integration of the architectural heritage into social life." (p. 10, para. 5)

The same objectives are also expressed in the Charter of Venice, which was drawn up in May 1964 by the International Congress of Architects and Technicians on Historical Monuments.

In line with the above, the aforementioned Council of Europe report states the following (para. 5.3):

"In several cases the churches are used, whether as mosques or for other purposes ... Although the point is controversial, we find it difficult to criticize such reuse. As the Turkish Cypriots point out, it has been general Council of Europe policy for some time to urge reuse of redundant religious buildings."

The Turkish Cypriot side has done and is still doing everything within its rather limited means to preserve the cultural wealth of the island, so much of which is in evidence in Northern Cyprus. Turkish Cypriot authorities have been calling upon international bodies responsible for providing financial and technical assistance in the field to extend such assistance to Northern Cyprus with a view to bolstering its efforts towards the preservation of cultural heritage. The Greek Cypriot side, however, is sparing no effort in preventing these international organizations from extending any assistance to Northern Cyprus, a clear illustration of the hypocrisy and insincerity of the Greek Cypriot administration, which, on the one hand, complains repeatedly that sufficient care is not being taken and, on the other, does its utmost to prevent Northern Cyprus from obtaining the means to provide such care.

It is evident from the foregoing that the Greek Cypriot side's complaints regarding cultural property have no basis and are utterly unjustified. Since it is the Greek Cypriot side that has systematically attacked, destroyed or treated with utter disrespect cultural and religious monuments, places of worship and other elements of culture belonging to the Turkish-Muslim heritage of the island, the Greek Cypriot allegations on this issue appear to be an attempt to cover up their long-standing policy of religious intolerance.

I should be grateful if the text of the present letter could be circulated as a document of the General Assembly, under agenda item 61, and of the Security Council.

(Signed) Aytuğ PLÜMER
Representative
Turkish Republic of
Northern Cyprus